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COMMENTARY

Letters to a Young Teacher

Why new recruits leave inner-city classrooms—and what it will take to keep them there.

By Jonathan Kozol



The truth about the flight of teachers from our public schools has been obscured by lack of clear distinctions between schools of very different kinds. The loss of first-year teachers from suburban schools is not particularly high. In inner-city neighborhoods, by contrast, on the basis of my conversations with at least 200 of these young recruits, I would estimate that upwards of one-half decide to leave the school in which they're placed by the end of their third year.

This is why, in my newest book, which represents a year of correspondence with a highly motivated 1st grade teacher whom I call Francesca, I try to share with her the strategies I've learned from other urban teachers who have managed to resist the inclination to throw up their hands and leave their jobs, no matter what frustrations they experience.

In these letters, I take issue with the common explanation, one I hear repeatedly from those who do not seem to know too many of these bright young people, that the major cause of their frustrations is an inability to relate successfully to children of minorities. At least in the case of the better-educated and more idealistic teachers—and there are more of them than ever nowadays—who come into the classroom steeped in civil rights traditions and the values of their frequently progressive parents, they enter public education with a purposeful and even preferential option for the children of the black and brown and poor.

The most frequently reiterated reason for discouragement that they express has nothing to do with "relating to their students," with whom they tend to strike an almost instantaneous rapport. Instead, it has to do with the systematic crushing of their creativity and intellect, the threatened desiccation of their personalities, and the degradation of their sense of self-respect under the weight of heavy-handed, business-modeled systems of Skinnerian instruction, the cultural denuding of curriculum required by the test-prep mania they face, and the sense of being trapped within "a state of siege," as one teacher puts it, all of which is now exacerbated by that mighty angst machine known as No Child Left Behind.

The challenge for such teachers, as they convey it to me in our conversations, is: (1) to hold fast to the pedagogic principles they value and the tenderness of their attachment to young people that has brought them to the classroom in the first place, (2) to do so in a way that will not isolate them in their schools and leave them feeling all the more discouraged as a consequence. I urge these teachers, for example, not to turn their backs on veteran instructors in their schools, a common error made by inexperienced idealists. Although, in any given school, there are bound to be some older teachers who may not be helpful allies or ideal role models for beginning teachers, the best among them bring a sense of personal stability and of assimilated selflessness into a school and, when younger teachers treat them with respect and turn to them as friends, typically respond with the protective kindness that can be a salvatory comfort for a novice teacher under stress.

I also urge these teachers: Reach out as quickly as you can to the parents of your students, especially those parents who initially are least responsive. Give them your cellphone number. Visit them in afternoons or evenings. And, in the case of young white teachers serving children of minorities, learn to cross the lines of race and class in sensitive but determined ways that lower the barriers between your classroom and your children's homes. Winning the solidarity of parents is one of the best ways, in my own experience, of building a structure of defense against potential critics in the upper levels of bureaucracy who may not appreciate a youthful teacher's healthy instinct for dissent.

Most of all, I encourage in these teachers a sense of what I like to call "enjoyable and mischievous irreverence" in the course of navigating those mandated miseries introduced by federal pressure into many inner-city schools but, at the same time, a mature sophistication and respectfulness in dealing with their principals, who often view the policies they must enforce with the very same distaste their younger teachers do. Many good principals, while they'd seldom say this openly at school, tell me in private that the burden of anxiety about the threat of sanctions that hang constantly like sharpened swords above their heads is leading them to foist upon their teachers practices they pedagogically abhor. Some tell me that they secretly applaud those teachers who are not afraid to undermine the stern intentionality of these mandated practices with thinly veiled lightheartedness, so long as they can teach the skills their students need and have a sensible regard for classroom management. They know these are the teachers who will not quit in despair.

In Francesca's case, none of this proved difficult, in part because she'd been superbly grounded both in educational techniques and in the critical consciousness derived from her immersion in political science and the other areas of liberal arts and sciences during her college years. She was also blessed with the kind of incandescent personality that won the adoration of her children almost from the minute that they walked into her room.

Firm when she needed to be, she quickly learned that look of earned authority that, with a single glance, could bring a slightly wild and rambunctious little boy out of his periodic episodes of orbiting the room and get him back into his chair to work, reluctantly, at putting vowels in between his consonants, as 6-year-olds quite stubbornly refuse to do at first. But she never sacrificed the sheer aesthetic merriment of being with small children, and she built her literacy lessons not out of a scripted text of grunts and chants but, as much as possible, out of the words her children actually selected and enjoyed ("wiggly" and "wobbly," when teeth were coming loose) or sometimes very big words, like "bamboozle" or "persnickety," the sounds of which had stirred their curiosity when they had heard them spoken by their grandma, for example.

Even when she spoke to me about the most draconian requirements "aligned"—to use a mechanistic piece of jargon she deplored—with state exams, her voice still had that energetic sound of somebody who never lets herself be beaten down but keeps on coming back with a nice sense of lively combat and delicious bits of irony about the contradictions that she had to deal with. I tell young teachers, "You are going to need a good big helping of Francesca's sly, subversive sense of humor in the face of state-ordained absurdities like being told to write across your chalkboard the 'official number' for each mini-chunk of amputated knowledge you're obliged to teach, in case a clipboard bureaucrat walks into your room and wants to know which 'state proficiency' you are 'delivering' at that specific minute of the morning."

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Francesca, I am glad to say, refused to put those numbers on her wall because, she said, their only purpose was "to cover my rear end—they have zero value to my children." And although her students mastered all the skills they needed to do well on their exams, she refused to turn her class into a test-prep factory or allow the fear of failure to be substituted, as a motivating principle, for the natural rewards of learning for its own inherent sake alone.

She also refused to genuflect before the business-driven values that have penetrated many inner-city schools, where I routinely see embarrassing and mawkish posters telling kids the "mission" of their school is to "produce" the "workers" that our nation needs in order to "compete in global markets." Upper-middle-class suburban schools, she scathingly observed, would "never stoop to put that kind of gibberish on the wall."

Inspired teachers of young children, like Francesca, ardently refuse to see themselves as servants of the global corporations or drill sergeants for the state. They disdain to be regarded chiefly as technicians of utilitarian proficiency. And

they stalwartly refuse to see their pupils as so many future economic units for a corporate society, into whom they are expected to pump “added value,” as the number-crunchers who determine much of education policy demand.

Few of these technocrats appear to recognize much pre-existing value in the young mentalities of children or, indeed, to be acquainted closely with the personalities and character of children. Rarely, if ever, do they ask if children ought to have some opportunity for happiness during the hours that they spend with us in school. (I cannot find that word in any sentence of the No Child Left Behind Act.)

Faced with these pathogenic pressures, teachers of young children in particular need to learn not only to prevail in the quite literal respect of keeping their jobs and staying in their schools, but also to retain their sense of playful energy and fascination in the unexpected offerings of all those pint-sized packages of whim and curiosity who are entrusted to their care. This is why I fervently encourage them, even in the most decrepit and depressive-looking of our urban schools, to fight with every bit of courage they command to defend the right to celebrate each perishable day and hour in a child’s life, which, in the current climate of opinion, may be one of the greatest challenges they have.

Schools can probably survive quite well without their rubrics charts, their AYPs, and their obsessive lists of numbered categories and containers, reminiscent of the lists severe psychotics make in efforts to control the uncontrollable and, for healthy people, wonderful disorder of reality. They can’t survive without excited teachers who take satisfaction in the beautiful vocation they have chosen. Keeping young teachers in our schools is of immense importance, but keeping them there with spirits strong and souls intact is more important still. If we lose this, we lose everything.

*Jonathan Kozol is a National Book Award-winning author of 12 books on education. His newest work, *Letters to a Young Teacher*, was released this week by Crown. The supportive network he recently created for teachers in the public schools may be reached at EducationActionInfo@gmail.com.*